

Soldiers *Online*



The Berlin Wall — actually a series of walls, fences and obstacles — turned West Berlin into an “island” within East Germany.

WHEN GERMANY WAS DIVIDED

Story by Renita Foster

Bob Hopkins was a boy living in West Germany when construction of the Berlin Wall began Aug. 13, 1961, and served in Germany as an Army intelligence officer during much of the Cold War. Today the retired warrant officer remembers . . .



Now just a preserved reminder of times past, the tower at Operations Point Alpha once overlooked a key section of the former East-West German border.

OVERGROWN hedges and remnant strips of wasteland are about the only reminders left of the “Iron Curtain” that divided Germany for almost half a century. But when retired warrant officer Bob Hopkins returned to Germany and gazed across the former East-West German border, he saw something else, something he’s never forgotten. “The metal lattice fences, dogs on leashes, searchlights, even those East German guards and me in the towers scrutinizing each other through field glasses. They are as real now as they were then,” said Hopkins who spent the major-

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Members of the Soviet 6th Independent Motorized Rifle Brigade stand at attention during the last guard change at Spandau Prison.

It was just unbelievable something like this existed.

-ity of his Army career as an intelligence officer in areas like Coburg, Bad Neustadt, Berlin, and Bad Hersfeld.

Serving as a member of a Border Residence Office required Hopkins to interview people who had escaped from East Germany and to constantly watch for changes on and beyond the border. He also acted as a liaison between American Forces and the West German Army, German Customs and German Border Police, assisting them in their operations.

As the son of an American soldier and German mother, Hopkins spoke fluent German, making him a natural for such assignments. Ironically, his father was stationed in Germany on Aug. 13, 1961, when the Wall and frontier barricades were started. Hopkins remembers his dad, while stationed with the Constabulary Forces in the early '50s in Bamberg, sharing stories about American and Russian soldiers swapping cigarettes and vodka.

"They actually socialized with each

other," Hopkins said. "Yet, by the time I came on active duty, contact was absolutely forbidden and Soviet soldiers had been replaced by East German Border Guards.

Despite growing up and serving nearly a decade in Germany, it wasn't until his 1985 assignment with the 108th Military Intelligence Battalion,

Hopkins described many of the East Germans as being ecstatic that they had escaped. Afterward, however, came guilt about families remaining in the East who would be subject to retaliation.

in Wildflecken, that he actually saw the Berlin Wall.

"I was a sergeant first class debriefing refugees from Eastern Block countries when I was finally confronted by the Berlin Wall. As I stood there in front of it, I realized this really was the end of the free world. It was just unbelievable something like this existed."

Hopkins stresses that what most people think of as "the Wall" only existed in Berlin, while the rest of East and West Germany was divided by more than 800 miles of fence.

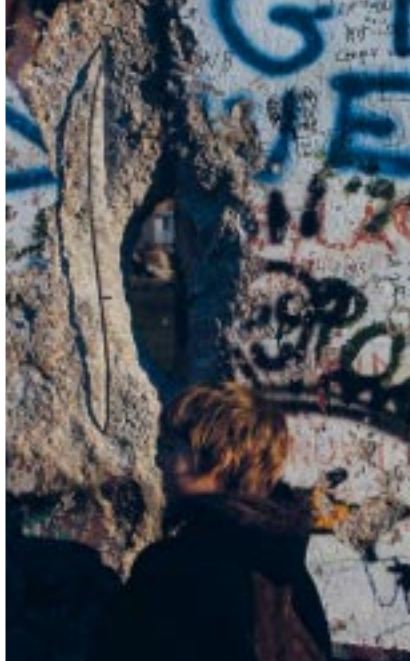
The barrier between the two countries was multi-layered, complete with barbed wire, heavily-armed fortifications and mine fields. A signal security fence located farther back into East Germany tipped guards of escape attempts.

Hopkins remembers that during his tour at the BRO in Coburg, in 1976, one East German managed to escape despite badly injuring an arm on the razor-sharp fence top. Another escapee

lost all sense of direction because the frontier barrier was constructed in a zigzag manner, keeping the defector totally confused as to where he actually was. Fortunately, he was able to hide until learning he'd made it to the West.

"Unless you were a border guard and knew the area well, you didn't know the series of signal security towers and actual border fences and possible mine fields or traps," Hopkins said, describing the maze that faced the potential escapee.

And then there was the "death strip." A work force was occasionally escorted to the west side of the fence, with two guards accompanying each laborer. A red tape was strung around their work area with the stern warning that anyone crossing it would be shot, and a



MSG Gil High

After the Wall was breached, those sections still standing became targets for souvenir hunters wanting a piece of history.

stopped. Not even when his former partner on the tower began shouting and aimed his rifle. The East German reported that the last sound he heard before reaching the freedom of the West was a metallic click instead of the sharp crack of a discharged weapon.

And what about the price of freedom so highly coveted by the East Germans? Hopkins described many of the East Germans as being ecstatic that they had escaped. Afterward, however, came guilt about families remaining in the East who would be subject to retaliation.

A series of small white crosses commemorating East Germans who gambled for freedom and lost is one anguishing legacy left by the perilous barricades.

Hopkins recalled one of his most devastating experiences was in 1978 in the Coburg sector, when a young man had made it across all border fortifications but was badly wounded.

"He was only about 10 feet from the border and his freedom. All we could do was stand there and watch him die with an ambulance and doctors anxiously waiting and hoping he'd make it. Had anyone tried to reach him, they'd have endangered their own lives and caused an international incident. We all knew East German Border Guards were ordered to shoot to kill."

Hopkins again observed the barrier's senseless horror when an East German guard's leg was blown off while clearing mines. "Even when your worst enemy is hurt, you hurt," he said.



Checkpoint Charlie was for decades one of the main — and certainly the most famous — of the crossing points between communist East Berlin and free West Berlin.

slight movement in that direction was viewed as an escape attempt.

Hopkins' last illegal border crosser came in 1989 during his assignment as officer in charge of the BRO in Bad Hersfeld.

Assigned as a border guard at the Untersuhl crossing point in East Germany, the East German shrewdly disabled his partner's weapon. Then under the pretense of using the bathroom and checking train tracks, the guard descended from the tower and entered the alley where the daily passenger train traveled to and from East Germany.

The moment he entered the train corridor, he started running and never



The otherwise unremarkable Glienicck Bridge gained fame during the Cold War as the East-West crossing point where spies were exchanged.

A series of small white crosses commemorate East Germans who gambled for freedom and lost...



East and West Germans joyously mobbed the 28-year-old Berlin Wall on Nov. 9, 1989, and soon afterwards the Wall came down and the city was whole again.

During his assignments along the frontier, Hopkins came to realize the Berlin Wall and frontier barricades not only divided a country, but families living within yards of each other.

"There was a designated place on the border in the Coburg sector, where a cross was mounted, and you could look across and see the cemetery in East Germany. Occasionally, family members living in West Germany would congregate there and participate in a funeral service actually being held in the East. Sometimes they'd hold up children and wave to one another. These people were desperately trying to hold on to family unity as best as they could. If the East German border guards saw East German families responding in any way, the families were immediately reprimanded and faced severe penalties. The guards simply didn't tolerate contact of any kind."

Hopkins's last assignment on the border was with the 165th MI Bn. in Darmstadt in 1989, with duty at the BRO in Bad Hersfeld. He was now a warrant officer and fully expected to manage the BRO for another three-year tour.

But on the evening of Nov. 9th, history abruptly changed. At midnight, East and West Germans joyously mobbed the 28-year-old Berlin Wall. The frenzied celebration intensified as East Berliners burst through the few



Heike Hasenauer

A memorial to those who died trying to escape East Germany once adorned the west side of the Berlin Wall, not far from the infamous "death strip."

openings and clambered to the top of the wall, joined by thousands from the West.

At Hopkins' station along the Intra-German Border, however, U.S. Forces went on full alert.

"We really had no clue what to expect," he said. "As a soldier I couldn't let my guard down, because it was quite possible Russian tanks would follow those crowds rambling over the official crossing points. Instead, we were overwhelmed by East Germans getting off their late shift at factories in East Germany. They wanted to see if it was true they were free to go without permission. Then all they wanted to do was just talk to westerners and drink a Coke!"

Back in Berlin, "chiseling mania" quickly followed as Berliners and visitors to the city acquired souvenirs

On the evening of Nov. 9th, history abruptly changed. At midnight, East and West Germans joyously mobbed the 28-year-old Berlin Wall.

from one of the most infamous barriers ever known. It's a phenomenon Hopkins easily understood, especially since he was one of the millions who did it.

"The Cold War had been going on all these years, and then it was suddenly over. People couldn't help but get excited," he said. "My biggest thrill was getting a piece of the Wall near Checkpoint Charlie, the American entrance to East Berlin."

Hopkins moved to Tampa, Fla., after retiring in 1993, and two years later began working at the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office as a criminal intelligence analyst in the organized crime bureau.

But the gripping adventures of the German border and the unforgettable memory of the collapse of the "Iron Curtain" never left him. So when the 11th Armored Cavalry held a reunion in May 2000 for all soldiers who served along the border, he returned to Germany.

"I think it was intrigue more than anything else. To see a country that I considered my home, along with America, go from one extreme to the other; it just wasn't your regular life's adventure," Hopkins said.

"I felt an intense desire to see how Germany had come together, economically and socially. For those of us who served there when the country was divided, that moment of world history meant a great deal.

"The fact is you can put up a front all you want, you can keep people in the dark for 45 years, but sooner or later they find out the truth. East Germany destroyed itself. And I believe it's highly significant the world was able to overcome the Cold War peacefully, since more people were killed during its existence than when it ended." □